

The semiotic characteristics of religious symbols



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Abstract: symbols , which are meaningful and imaginative, are widely used in western religion. Actually, religious symbols are not only signs, but also a picture which contains thousands of meanings. Semiotics gives us a channel to achieve our aims — reading the thought of our ancestors.

Key words: semiotics, religion, religious symbols, signs

I. Introduction

The origin of the religious symbols

The brain, which is always interested in the environment, distinguishes us from ordinary animals. Humans always ask some questions about the world: who we are, why we live on this plant, where we go to after we dead, what the meaning of raining, flood, thunder, meteor is. Thousands of years ago, humans can not answer some of these questions scientifically. So it makes us to believe that there is a kind of powerful force controlled these things. Actually, to some extent humans create a belief system which can answer these questions by themselves.

Humans derive an integrated symbol and sign system, which is used to represent our thought about the universe, from the belief system. Also the religious symbols belong to it. Actually, the origin religious symbols are totem. Lu Deping has give a very comprehensive definition in his paper "Semiotic Interpretation of the Primitive Totems" Totem is the marker for the primitive people to identify their social affiliation consciously. It also acts as the means for the primitive groups to define their existence from the empirical continuum or the environment mingled with them."(Lu Deping , 2004) Most of the totems are abstracted from the natural such as animals ,

plants, mountains and so on. The Chinese dragon, which is associated by more than ten kinds of animals, is a typical totem in Chinese history. Totems rate high in mythical discourses, religious rites, and some primitive paintings . Totems are treated as symbols which can connect humans with the mysterious power which is controlling the world. With the development of human society, thousands of years latter, the threaten and worship for the mysterious power promote us to trust that there are God or Buddha in the world. Then everything that we can not understand looks logical. God or Buddha can save us from disease, disaster and anything bad. Then totems change with the passing time. They become much simple and easy to be drawn or identification such as (Christian Cross), (Star of David), (Lotus Flower), (Taiji).

B. Difference between symbol and sign

In our daily life, we always try our best to distinguish symbols and signs apart. However, it is hard to do this sometimes. In linguistics, semiotics and psychology, symbol and sign are equal with each other at most times. Symbol needs sign to allege itself, and also sign means the symbolic sign. In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (Sixth edition), it give us a definition of sign and symbol: sign is a mark which used to represent something, especially in mathematics. Also it means an event, an action, a fact that shows that something exists, is happening or may happen in the future .(A S Hornby. P1626). Symbol is defined as a sign, number, letter, etc. that has a fixed meaning especially in science mathematics and music.(A S Hornby. P1791) As you see in dictionary, symbol and sign almost have the same meaning. They can also mean something that indicates that

something exists or may happen, but a sign is usually something that you may find or see, while symbol is usually insinuate. It is much more meaningful. For example, sign always gives us something simple and direct. it means enter forbidden. it means no turning left. On the other side, symbol is image or the underlying meaning behind the sign. For example , fire is the symbol of the sun and the male power, the spring flowers represent a new birth and new life. When we observe the world with symbol, maybe you feel that life become much more colorful and meaningful.

In academic field, the argumentations about sign and symbol have never stopped . In all of which Saussure and Pierce are the representative of symbol in semiotics. Saussure' position of symbol and sign is not definite. But in his Course in General Linguistics, he think that “ the word symbol is sometimes used to designate the linguistic sign, or more exactly the part of the linguistic sign which we are calling the signal.”(Ferdinand de Saussure, 1986, p. 68). But Pierce point out that everything is a sign. ” It defines three roles encompassing (1) the sign, (2) the sign's subject matter, called its object, and (3) the sign's meaning or ramification as formed into a kind of effect called its interpreting .”(Charles Sanders Peirce by wikipedia). Peirce think that symbol belongs to sign . We can conveniently explain the semiotic phenomenon. For example, the shop signboard is a sign, The words or symbol is sign. The shop which represents is the object. At last , the information of the words or symbol is the interpreting.

II. The relationship between religion and religion symbols

No matter which kind of religion it is, in its early iterations, religion is expression by symbols. Before Gandhara time, there is no Buddhist Statue in Buddhism. People use the symbols such as the big banyan tree, pedestal, dharma-cakra and footmark and so on to represent some meanings. The same with Buddhism, the early Christianity also use a symbolic way to extend its doctrines. For example, the Christian Cross represent Christ, The palm tree stands for a martyr. Fish is the symbol of Jesus. Peacock means this eternal soul within the body of every living entity is immortal; Interestingly most of the religions choose plants, animals, or abstract symbols to symbolize its doctrines. Religious symbols are also changed with the development of religion. Until now, the cross is often shown in different shapes and sizes, in many different styles. It may be used in personal jewelry, or used on top of church buildings.

A. The importance of religion in western people's eyes

As we know, religions have a wide-ranging influence on social life in western country. They are concerns about law, politics, art, economy and science. It is a long time that law and religions have the same element: observances, traditions, authority and generality.

Before the Middle Ages, or in the Middle Ages, in Rome the Church almost have control the country. Church has its own canon law. People are not only protected by the Natural Law, but also observe the canon law and be committed to the church, or they would be punished by the canon law. The canon law is formed by Bible, resolution of church meeting, Pope's edict and Roman law.

In the world of art, the religion have a far-reaching effect. One of the most famous painters, Da Vinci has painted some famous paint such as The Last Supper, The Vitruvian Man, The Baptism of Christ and so on. Even though Da Vinci is regarded as a Christian. The Last Supper the most reproduced religious painting of all time. Perhaps you have known a best seller book named The Da Vinci Code . In the book , the writer has given as a new side to understand The Last Supper . He thinks that there is a big secret hidden in The Last Supper. It is about the Holy Grail which is an argument in Christianity. The writer also says " Da Vinci incorporated in many of his Christian paintings hidden symbolism that was anything but Christian-tributes to his own beliefs and a subtle thumbing of his nose at the Church (Dan Brown, 2003, p50) Although the viewpoint is not agree with most pursuers , but I think Da Vince can not draw these works with any effects of religion.

If you are a careful person or a politic enthusiastic, you may notice the inaugural speech of the USA. Almost all the presidents of American will say " God bless you, God bless the United States of American ." at the end of the speech. It is regarded as the most obvious example of the effect religion in politics. The incumbent president, Obama in his inaugural speech says " We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus – and non-believers." " To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." You can find that the disciples of religion are also the important source of votes. And the church also has a lot of social capital. Church can provide a lot of volunteers for community work. The church holds the non-governmental organization such as hospital,

orphanage, and a homeless centre together. In fact, most of primary school in American are hold by church.

Religion has a far-reaching influence in western people's life. Ninety-five percent Americans are blamed he believes god. They may go to church every week and tell the god what they have done or what they want to do next week. Even more remarkable, Christian would pray before their meal in order to thank god for his mercy. When they face some problem or difficulties, they may beg god for power. Most Christians believe that they will go into heaven if they do something good., or they help god to punish evils. In western countries, there are also some festivals connected with religion. Christmas, Easter, All Saints' Day are known by us. Christmas is the birthday of Jesus. It is the most important festival in western countries.

The important use of the religious symbols during religious activities

When we talk about religious symbols, we must understand what it is. In the front of my paper, I have given you the definition in the dictionary of symbol. But I think religious symbol have a little different with it. Religious symbols are a mark used as a token of something invisible. Religious symbols have a perpetual connection with the significance. They must respect a concept which is hard to deeply understand and hold in the round.

As the understanding of religious symbols, Here, I want to point out three important use of them in religious activities.

The first one is conveyance. In religious activities, religious symbols are treated as a ' paper'. On the paper, the wish of us has been written . Colors

have considered as religious symbols. There are two groups of colors in Christianity. The first group is red, white, green and blue. They are used to explain the hope of life, pure, peace and beautiful. The black, brown, grey and yellow stand for danger, death and unclean. So you may find that in western countries' celebration of a marriage, the bridal dress must be white, and the pastor should wear a white or red shawl to bless the new couple. But in the funeral, the pastor may wear a black shawl to make a memorial speech. Religious symbols have been used as a way to send some information to others. Actually, the cathedral is not only a place for prayer, but also a symbol of religion. People pray to God to keep their family from harm or forgive their crimes. Here God shows his mercy to all of us. Then the cathedral has been treated as a refuge of our soul. It conveys the order of God to us and points out the way forward.

The second is connection. During religious activities, we often see Christians make the sign of the cross over themselves as a way to sanctify or devote. Exactly, they think it is a way to communicate with God. When they make the cross, the soul is connecting with God. They will get the message from God. On the other side, the cross is considered as the symbol of God. It is the God incarnate. They pray before the cross in order to inspire from God and clean their soul.

The third is decoration. The Christian Cross is often used on the top of the church. Firstly, it symbolizes it is a church and its awfulness. But the second is decoration. Actually, religious symbols are widely used in religious buildings and arts. Cross, Rose and four colors which I have introduced to you in the front of my paper, are three kinds of common elements in Christian buildings.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-semiotic-characteristics-of-religious-symbols/>

When you walk into a church, you may observe the window carefully. There are a lot of pictures on the window. Most of these pictures describe a story between pope and his knights. You can easily find that cross is used on the shield of knight and his cloth. Of course, most of pictures can not get through with color. Christianity likes to use white, blue, green and golden to decorate these pictures. There is one important plant in Christianity. The vines is to Christianity what lotus is to Buddhism. In Bible, there are a lot of story mentioned the vines “ For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.” (Matthew, 20: 1) “ So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.” (Matthew, 20: 8) “ And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?”(Judges 9: 13) There are some other place mentioned vines such as Isaiah 5: 1-7, Mark 12: 1, Luke 20: 9 and so on. That is why vines can be use on the wall of church’s building and the martyrs’ tomb.

III. The semiotic characteristics of religious symbols

In the front of my paper, we have analysis the religious symbols through the cultural semiotics and general semiotics. Actually, Semiotic has been divide into linguistic semiotics, general semiotics, cultural semiotics. Religious symbols are various in forms and rich content. They are full of or characterized by semiotic meaning.

A. The characteristics of semiotics

We should analysis the status and influence of contemporary semiotics in two aspects: surface and substance. On the face of it, Semiotics has been not an independent subject. The achievements in scientific research are not noticeable and some of the achievements are lack of quality. Judging by substance, semiotics has been widely used in most of the humanities. More and more celebrated scholars be engaged in semiotics research. The phenomenon reflects the exuberant vitality of semiotics. In Li Youzheng' book-Introduction to Theoretical Semiotics, the writer introduce the complex of Semiotics. Mostly¼Æmy opinion is also based on this book. In Introduction to Theoretical Semiotics, the write definite the semiotics like this " Semiotics is a subject which analyzes sign, semiosis or the function of sign." (Li Youzheng, 1996. p. 2) and symbol is belong to its study. So as far as I am concerned, Semiotics has three marked characteristics.

Firstly, Semiotics has a long history. Posner has divided it into six types: Ancient Greece and Rome, Ancient and Middle Age, Middle Age western semiotics history, the modern western, the contemporary western, The concept of non-Western notation history. (Historical and Theory, a Journal Chinese, 1988. P116-117). The history of semiotics is tracked back to 3000 B. C. But until the 60th age, the semiotics is treat as an independent discipline, which emerges in French, American and Soviet.

Secondly¼ÆSemiotics is a complicated and broad science. Li Youzheng also divides the semiotics into three parts: linguistic semiotics, general semiotics and cultural semiotics. Linguistic semiotics has used linguistic, phonemics, semantics, stylistics and rhetoric. Linguistic semiotics must use coordination

<https://assignbuster.com/the-semiotic-characteristics-of-religious-symbols/>

of several subjects to explore the meaning of symbols or signs. Compared with linguistic semiotics, perhaps general semiotics is a little simpler. But it also involves various theories such as Morrice's conception of theory of sign system, Eco's typology of signs, Peirce's Typology of signs, Non-Stricit code systems. These theories are all important and never be neglected in the semiotic history.

Lastly, the cross-cultural research is extremely difficulty. The most obvious point is the understanding of a symbol "å" In most influenced by Buddhism, people think that "å" respects constancy and auspicious indication. But in World War 2. Hitler chooses it to be the sign of Nazi. Hitler consider the Aryans is the best race all around the world. "å" is the symbol of Aryans. Another is color. In western country, rose is the symbol of love, and red symbolize the passion, but sometimes it refers to scarlet woman. As I know, red always refers to pure love and happy in China and India. Chinese bride always wears a red dress. So we can easily find that different cultural take different understanding of symbols and sign. When we are going to analysis the meaning of a symbol or sign across culture, it may take a big problem to us.

The characteristics of religious symbols

The same as the semiotics, the religious symbols have a long history. At the beginning of my paper, I have introduced the original religious symbol-Totem to you. Religious symbols almost have the same history of human's civilization.

With the development of religion and civilization, religious symbols also have different forms. is the symbol of Islam named star and crescent. It standard bright and perfect. is a special symbol. There are many ideas about the symbolic meaning of the Star of David. Some Kabbalists think that the six points represented God's absolute rule over the universe in all six directions: north, south, east, west, up and down. They also believed that the triangles represented humanity's dual nature – good and evil – and that the star could be used as protection against evil spirits. The structure of the star, with two overlapping triangles, has also been thought to represent the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The star that points up symbolizes God and the star that points down represents us here on earth. Yet others have noticed that there are twelve sides on the triangle, perhaps representing the Twelve Tribes. Until now, people still have an absolute meaning of the Star of David. A lot of religious symbols have an obscure meaning. You can not only understand it by its structure or shape. For example, lamb in Christianity means the resurrection of Christ from the death. Can you say it means meekness and prettiness? Absolutely not!

The connection of semiotics and religious symbols

After the analysis of characteristics of semiotics and religious symbols, we can find that religious symbols have a much longer history than semiotics. But symbols as the research subject, we have analysis by the systematization of semiotics. Semiotics can explain the meaning of symbols by different aspects and draw a correct conclusion. Although symbols are a complex and changeable system, semiotics always gives us an rational sublimation. Symbol also accelerates the progress of semiotics. It is hard for

me to find a suitable metaphor to describe the relationship between them. But I think if symbols is water, the semiotics must be fish. The fish can not live without water. Without fish the water will never be vibrant.

IV. Conclusion

Haviland said “ Religion can be seen as an organized series of supernatural power’s belief or ceremonies.”(William A. Haviland, 2005, p. 392). Religious symbols are a part of our belief. Semiotics is a tool of investigation. It may be not consummate and comprehensive, but it has afforded us a direction to analysis our belief system. Also that is the point we need to work for. Modern semiotics is a new branch of knowledge. It has been neglect for a long time. Its popularity must take a brain-storm in research of symbols.